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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the implications of present testing programs for minority groups. The effects on prospective teachers and the institutions that prepare them are discussed. The role of the testing movement in molding the curriculum that is taught in colleges of education is described with particular consideration of state-mandated standardized tests. The primary focus of the paper is on traditionally black institutions and an overview is given of successful programs they have instituted to overcome perceived negative effects of standardized testing. It is noted that, given the kinds of pressures that minority candidates face, it is difficult to criticize black colleges for "teaching to the test" as a short term solution. Twenty-two references are included. (JD)

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Teacher Competency Testing and Equity: Implications For Teacher Education

Eric F. Wood

The move to test teachers for competency has grown rapidly in the past decade. Fueled by criticisms of the education system in general, and the knowledge base of teachers in particular, by 1985, 38 states required that teachers pass some sort of competency test before being certified to teach (Cooper, 1986). Recent reform proposals also contain recommendations with respect to the testing of teachers for competency and it is likely that further moves in this direction will take place in the future. More detailed accounts of the present status of present testing programs are widely available (see Witty, 1986); however, the role of this paper is to examine some of the implications for minority groups of such testing programs; the effects on prospective teachers and the institutions that prepare them; and the role of the testing movement in molding the curriculum that is taught in Colleges of Education. In addition, a brief overview of successful programs instituted to overcome perceived negative effects will be presented.

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Implications for Minority Teachers

There is little doubt that minority students do, in fact, produce significantly lower scores on standardized tests than do white students (Gifford, 1986; Mercer, 1984), although the reasons for the score differentials that occur are not nearly as clear. Although some scholars have postulated that these differences are, in fact, indicators of genetic differences (Jensen, 1984), many writers in this area feel that the generally impoverished educational experiences that minority students have access to is the real reason (Greer, 1986). Regardless of the reason, the overall effect of low scores, coupled with the rapid proliferation of testing mandates in more and more states, is quite profound. Teacher education colleges are suffering a severe reduction in enrollment as fewer minority candidates gain access to education programs and a significant number of graduates fail to become certified to teach (Reed, 1986).

Nationally, it is estimated that by the year 2000, if present demographic trends continue, 30% of the school population will be made up of minority

children (Pressman and Gartner, 1986). Tragically, it is also estimated that by the year 1990, only 5% of all teachers in the United States will be from a minority group. In some areas of the country, for example, California, increases in the number of Hispanic children could cause the proportion of minority children to rise to as much as 52% by 1990 (Nieto, 1986). Both nationally and regionally, the teaching force will in no way approximate the culture from which the children who populate the schools are drawn. Unless this trend can be changed, the lack of role models for these minority children could further exacerbate the problems of minority education and lead to a never ending spiral of poverty and ignorance.

Effects on Teacher Training

The response of educators who are concerned about the twin issues of excellence and equity have been varied. Some are categorically opposed to making any kind of modifications in the way that the tests are used to screen students and claim that "[T]he fact that one is a minority cannot continue to be an excuse

for sub-standard performance" (Starr, 1986, p. 10). On the other hand, there are those who feel that the tests themselves are totally invalid and should not be used by any state regardless of the noble intention to encourage excellence (Garcia, 1986). Somewhere in between these somewhat polarized views are those who call for better designed, criterion referenced, tests that would accurately reflect what the student has been taught in his or her teacher education program (Popham, 1986).

Although all of these positions have arguments that can be made to either support or deny their veracity, the reality is that tests are in place now, and given the recommendations about professionalism and teacher quality in both A Nation Prepared (1986) and Tomorrow's Teachers (1986), it is highly unlikely that calls to eliminate such measures will have much impact.

Although some have argued that teachers trained in traditionally black institutions (TBIs) have a poorer chance of doing well on these tests than those trained in traditionally white colleges, the statistics suggest that this contention is not true. Recent studies show that the failure rate for blacks

is not significantly dependent on the racial tradition of the institution (Anrig, Goertz and McNeil, 1986).

It is true, however, that TBIs graduate the greatest percentage of education majors who are minority students (Dilworth, 1986). Furthermore, some states have instituted plans to put some colleges that train teachers on probation or remove their accreditation completely if the failure rate on teacher competency tests is too high (Cole, 1986). For these reasons TBIs have a greater stake in addressing the problem than many other institutions. Consequently, a number of these schools have called for educational reform to help solve the problem of low test scores for minority students.

It is interesting to note that few educators have called for lower cut scores, indeed, they believe not only that minority students <u>can</u> do well but that they <u>ought</u> to well (Holmes, 1986). Lowering cut scores would only confirm the views of people who believe that minority students are not as academically capable and further reduce the sense of racial pride that minority children have (Tanner, 1986). In addition, it can be argued that lowering cut scores increases the number of all groups who pass. Consequently a low cut

score will eventually mean that only minorities fail, since whites typically have higher scores than minorities (Anrig, Goertz and McNeil, 1986). Furthermore, there are those who believe that cut scores are specifically set at a level sufficiently high to ensure that minority students do not succeed (Smith, 1984). If such contentions are correct, it is clear that any modification of cut scores is unlikely to take place.

What has been the reaction of TBIs to the problem of pass rates among minority students? Grambling State College in Louisiana provides an example of what can be done with a concerted effort by all concerned. In 1978-79 only 3% of teacher education students at TBIs throughout the state passed the state exam for certification (Spencer, 1986). Rather than blaming the test, either philosophically or on technical grounds, the Dean of the College of Education, Dr. Burnett Joiner, enjoined the entire faculty of the university to work with him and his colleagues to improve the quality of the teacher preparation program.

The goals of this reform were simple: to provide remediation for students, identified as having good potential, who never the less had weak backgrounds;

while at the same time providing a challenging and stimulating educational experience for people destined to become teachers. This kind of reform involved the entire staff of the college, including those who were teaching academic options. Faculty were familiarized not only with the tests that prospective teachers had to take but also with item writing techniques so that faculty tests would allow students to develop test taking skills in the context of the material that they were being taught.

Students who were found to be deficient in basic skills such as reading and mathematics were provided with special programming to address these needs and their progress was monitored in an ongoing way throughout the four years of college study. In addition, seminars on test preparation and test writing were conducted. Prospective teachers at Grambling State actually take their state mandated tests before they finish their year so that they are certified upon graduation.

The results of this program have been very encouraging. Although the number of applicants in teacher education programs dropped from a historical level of 1250 to only 200 in 1981, by 1986 the

population of students studying education was back up to 850 and growing faster than any other university program. Furthermore, by the 1983-84 school year, the pass rate on the National Teacher Examination of Grambling State University students who elected to take the exam was 86%. Naturally some people in the education program had made plans to pursue things other than teaching since starting their studies, however, 43 out of 46 people who completed the program did in fact take the exam. In the 1981-82 school year, only 6 of the 31 candidates passed this same examination. It is clear that the kinds of intervention measures that were taken here have had a significant positive effect, without having a negative impact on students' feeling of self-worth. In fact, "[S]tudents feel good about the program now. They (graduates) know they have graduated from a program with tough standards. They know they can hold their own with anyone" (Joiner, cited in Spencer, 1986, p. 301).

Not all initiatives have been undertaken by the TBIs themselves. The state of Kentucky mandated state wide testing in 1984, but was concerned about the impact on both minority groups and rural students.

Rather than have differential cut scores, they opted for a program of intervention, with money coming from the discretionary funds of the Superintendent. Representatives from all teacher preparation institutions were invited to a conference whereby they could participate in the planning of the intervention strategy. It will take time to judge the effects of the special diagnosis and remediation procedures that have been put in place, however, the fact that a co-operative climate can be established between policy making bodies and educational institutions should provide encouragement for other states wishing to make similar arrangements (Nelli and Minnis, 1986).

Other schools have focussed their efforts on attempts to increase the student's ability to take tests (Gifford, 1986), but it seems clear that although such interventions may have some impact they cannot succeed in isolation. Furthermore, unless government agencies begin to appreciate that TBIs have special problems that require special funding, the kind of unique programming that is essential to produce both high test scores and excellence are unlikely to occur at many TBIs (Dupre, 1986).

Negative Impacts on Teacher Education

Programs such as the one described at Grambling State do have problematic side effects. It appears that the state tests are, in fact, the engine that drives the curriculum. Consequently, since the tests measure only a limited range of outcomes, it is very possible that these initiatives may actually have a deleterious effect on the competence of graduating teachers.

Porter and Freeman (1986) make the point that there are a number of significant professional orientations that bear on an individual's teaching effectiveness. At least one role of the teacher training process is to ensure that the kinds of professional beliefs held by teachers-to-be are consonant with the role of the school. For example, 50% of the students graduating from the teacher training program at Michigan State believe that goals other than intellectual development are the most important aspects of schooling. Approximately 20% believe that intellectual development is the least important part of schooling (Porter and Freemen, 1986). Unfortunately, the time required to address

these, and similar, issues is no longer available if the teacher education program is organized around the production of high test scores. The fact remains, however, that unless a program does address such student perceptions, the quality of the teachers that it produces is not likely to reach the standard of excellence that the testing movement was designed to achieve.

It is open to question whether the kind of reflective teacher that is described in Tomorrow's Teachers (1986) is likely to be produced by any kind of university studies that emphasize rote recall of basic, low level skills. It is quite possible, however, that teachers trained in this fashion will do a good job of preparing the students in their care to take such tests when they come to graduate from high school. Unfortunately, effects such as higher pass rates, for either students or teachers, are highly visible, and as such they are worthy of media attention. The public will perceive increases in test scores as significant indicators of a higher quality teaching force, regardless of the fact that presently available test instruments do not have a strong correlation with actual teaching performance.

One can argue that it is pedagogically wrong to "teach to a test", but given the kinds of pressures that minority candidates in teaching face, it is difficult to criticize TBIs for taking such an approach as a short term solution. If the reforms that are envisaged in the current national reform proposals do occur, and if funding is applied in such a way that TBIs are also able to restructure their programs to incorporate the main thrusts of the reform movement along with the kinds of special features needed to help minority students to succeed, then there is hope that in the long term the cry for "Equity and Excellence" will not be a voice in the wilderness.

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